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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: SINIORA, HARIRI RESOLUTE, ASK FOR HELP AND
CONTINGENCY PLANNING

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (S) The Ambassador met one-on-one with Prime Minister Fouad Siniora late on 11/16 and with Saad Hariri the following evening. Both the PM and the MP came across as strong and resolute, commenting that the March 8-Aoun alliance was taken aback by the March 14 resistance to the pro-Syrian demands. Acknowledging that Siniora's head is now high on the March 8-Aoun list of demands, they offered a familiar list of requests for support: quick action on the tribunal, strong messages to Syria and Iran, cessation of EU and U.S. hints of talking to and visiting Damascus, halt to Israeli overflights, something on Sheba' Farms. Siniora mused about a compromise to solve the cabinet crisis, a complicated formula which would allow each side, assuming good will, to claim victory. Informed by Hariri the following day that Berri found the proposal lacking, the Ambassador suggested that, nevertheless, the March 14 side peddle the proposal publicly, to demonstrate reasonableness. Hariri urged that the USG and its allies also develop contingency plans now for what happens if UNIFIL is attacked or Siniora killed. Syria is now emboldened, Hariri insisted, and only threatening contingency plans that leak will stay Syria's hand. Admitting that he was not speaking to Berri but had passed messages, Hariri said that he was open to dropping Siniora as part of a deal to kick out Emile Lahoud, but he did not indicate having a preferred presidential replacement. Asked about his future vision for the period after this crisis, Hariri emphasized Lahoud's dismissal and Hizballah's disarmament. Hariri also claimed that his father had a meeting with Hassan Nasrallah, where Rafiq Hariri had tried to convince Nasrallah to break with Syria. That conversation, Saad said, probably led to Rafiq's murder. End summary.

PROPOSING A COMPROMISE

12. (S) Siniora told the Ambassador that he had used (resigned) Minister of Health Mohamed Khalifeh to pass a message to Nabih Berri about a potential compromise to solve the cabinet crisis. Along the lines of an earlier discussion between Siniora and the Ambassador, the cabinet would expand from 24 to 30 ministers. The March 8-Aoun alliance would have 9 slots, short of the "one-third-plus-one" blocking minority that could trigger cabinet resignation on any issue. March 14 would have 19 ministers, less than the two-thirds needed to ram through action. Two ministers would be

considered neutral and be committed to refrain from voting on any issue where their votes would be decisive and also to refrain from being the decisive voices in triggering a cabinet resignation.

13. (S) To get decrees passed, March 14 would be forced to have votes from the March 8-Aoun camp. To trigger a cabinet resignation, March 8-Aoun would need to have at least two participants from the other side. In practice, Siniora said, this formula would not change the basic pattern of governing, since his cabinet had, with very few exceptions, operated on consensus all along. There would have to be an agreement in advance to approve the special tribunal. Siniora offered several variations on how the neutral ministers might be chosen and what would happen to current portfolios in such a reshuffle (as Aoun would certainly insist on one of the "big four" most powerful and prestigious ministries -- Interior, Finance, Defense, and Foreign Affairs -- which also have to be distributed among the "big four" confessions -- Maronite, Sunni, Shia, and Greek Orthodox). Siniora argued that, if there is good will on both sides, everyone can claim victory: March 8-Aoun can point to Aoun's participation with four ministries and to the fact that March 14 cannot push through cabinet decisions without March 8-Aoun concurrence. March 14 can point to the fact that March 8-Aoun did not get the "one-third-plus-one" minority that could topple the government at any time.

14. (S) Siniora reported that he was awaiting Berri's response. During the meeting, Khalifeh called Siniora to say that Berri was "cool but open" to the idea (a message Khalifeh repeated later in the conversation with the Ambassador). The following evening, Hariri told the Ambassador that Berri had told Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi that Siniora's proposed compromise was not sufficient

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to sell to Hizballah. The Ambassador encouraged Hariri and, by phone, Siniora to find a moment to take the idea public, as it made the March 14 side look reasonable in its approach.

Siniora said he agreed but said that he should not be the one to talk publicly about the compromise, lest Berri become annoyed; Hariri disagreed with public disclosure altogether, saying that it would make March 14 look weak rather than reasonable. March 8-Aoun would say that it was merely an opening position and insist on more. (Note: the proposal has now leaked in any case.)

MARCH 8-AOUN TAKEN ABACK
BY MARCH 14 RESPONSE

15. (S) Both Siniora and Hariri, while speaking a day apart, came across as strong and resolute. Siniora at one point scolded the Ambassador, "don't look at us as if we are on our last legs." Both offered variations on the same analysis: Syria was out to block the tribunal by any means and to destroy UNSCR 1701 implementation, which had proven more effective than anticipated in curbing Hizballah freedom in south Lebanon. Berri is a reluctant partner in these efforts but cannot break free of his Hizballah alliance and wishes of his Syrian and Iranian allies. Aoun is no longer an opportunistic ally but an enthusiastic partner of Hizballah. "Can't you expose Aoun for what he is?" Hariri urged, saying that Washington-based leaks on Aoun's Hizballah relations would have more credibility than anything Hariri could say or leak in Beirut.

16. (S) But both the PM and the MP also believed that March 8-Aoun were hesitating a bit in terms of their tactics. March 8-Aoun had anticipated that March 14 would quickly collapse in the face of the demands and threats for street action and civil disobedience. March 8-Aoun forces were surprised by the solidarity of March 14. Hariri, boasting that he could turn a "million Sunnis" out into the street instantly, said that March 8-Aoun are starting to recognize

that use of the street could ultimately hurt rather than help them. While Siniora (in the earlier of the two meetings) thought that March 8-Aoun civil disobedience could begin as early as Monday (11/20), Hariri, a day later, said that his information indicated that March 8-Aoun would delay by ten days, to gauge whether the constitutional/legal arguments might fatally weaken the Siniora cabinet on their own. Hariri, who vowed repeatedly to match any March 8-Aoun street demonstration with some of his own, dismissed the Ambassador's concern that March 14 Sunnis could easily be infiltrated by pro-Syrian agents determined to make trouble, as seemed to have happened during the Danish cartoon riots of February 5. Then, Hariri said, the "muftis made mistakes." This time, March 14 would be disciplined.

MOVING QUICKLY ON THE TRIUBNAL

17. (S) Siniora and Hariri gave similar, and familiar, suggestions on what the USG and others should do to strengthen the Siniora cabinet. Siniora in particular pleaded for the UN to turn around the special tribunal documents quickly, to get them back for their next round of cabinet approvals. While Syria is hostile to the tribunal, this issue can nevertheless be used to embarrass and corner Berri, Lahoud and others, who will be reluctant to admit publicly their opposition to finding out the truth behind Rafiq Hariri's murder. Hariri said that it would be "better" if the UNSC could simply adopt the tribunal quickly without further reference to Lebanon, but Siniora understood that such an option was legally and politically difficult.

PASSING MESSAGES AND DISCOURAGING RE-ENGAGEMENT (OR PERCEPTION THEREOF) WITH SYRIA

18. (S) Siniora reported that he had talked with all of the Arab countries ("even the Emir of Qatar!") except Algeria ("Bouteflika is against us") and Syria to brief them on the situation and urge their intervention with Syria and Iran. He did the same with Italy's Prodi, the EU's Solana, Turkey's Ertegun and Kofi Annan. Siniora urged that the USG use its contacts, "especially with Turkey," to pass on similar messages. Siniora and Hariri also expressed deep concern about the subliminal and more explicit messages being sent by the ongoing debate in the EU and United States about whether now is the time to re-engage with Syria. Both felt strongly

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that it was not and that any official visitors to Damascus would undermine March 14 forces in Lebanon, as the pro-Syrians and Aoun worked to convince the Lebanese public that the EU and U.S. were about to "sell out Lebanon again" to Syria. Siniora reported that he had complained to Tony Blair about the impact of Blair's recent remarks regarding Syria. But, alluding to Syria's intrasigence, Siniora laughed that "Blair's checks in Damascus seem to be bouncing." The Ambassador emphasized to Siniora and Hariri that the USG policy toward Syria was not softening. Hariri seemed convinced; Siniora less so.

SHEBA, OVERFLIGHTS, MEPP, ETC.

19. (S) Siniora also repeated his usual arguments about strengthening the Arab moderates, a camp in which he puts himself, by renewed progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track. "Anything you can do to show light at the end of that tunnel will help me," he claimed. Hariri and Siniora both asked for help on getting the Israelis out of the northern (Lebanese) side of Ghajjar village, halting Israeli overflights, and showing some kind of movement on Sheba' Farms. "Don't do these things to help me," Siniora (who, characteristically, talked about these issues in more detail than Hariri did) argued, "do them to help yourselves," in terms of the U.S. image. Siniora said that, while he

recognized that Sheba' Farms would not be placed under UN custody (as per his "seven points") quickly, he hoped for "some kind of horizon" that "will not be open-ended" on the issue. He said that, with Ghajjar, Sheba', and overflights all being "open wounds" in the Lebanese psyche, he wanted to be able to project himself and his cabinet as having the international credibility and clout to resolve these issues.

¶10. (S) The Ambassador noted to Siniora that he was facing an internal foe yet looking to Israel to solve his problems, an approach that seemed at odds with Siniora's harsh response whenever the Israelis hint at willingness to talk with Lebanon. Siniora accused the Ambassador and USG of "lack of imagination during crisis." He insisted that we are missing an opportunity in not pursuing a creative approach to Sheba'. The Ambassador asked Siniora about the 1949 Armistice Agreement, also covered in the "seven points" and mentioned in UNSCR 1701. Siniora evinced less enthusiasm than usual for the topic, saying that the modernization and amendments he seeks in the Armistice Agreement could only occur in the context of stopping overflights and solving Sheba' Farms.

CONTINGENCY PLANNING:
WARNING SYRIA

¶11. (S) Hariri said that, while he was convinced that March 8-Aoun were delaying street action, it was only a matter of time until "they do something bad against us." He therefore urged that the USG, working with France and other allies, start developing contingency plans now for what happens if the pro-Syrians use violence. What will the USG do, he asked, if UNIFIL is attacked? What will the USG do if Siniora is killed or his Grand Serail office and official residence destroyed? If an Embassy is attacked? Hariri offered his own strongly held opinion -- "bomb Damascus!" The important point, Hariri said, is to make it clear now that "you won't simply use words," that Syria will have to pay some kind of cost for its actions in Lebanon. "Don't use the Israelis," Hariri said, for then Syria will be seen as a martyr in the Arab world. But make it clear now, he urged, that there will be severe consequences for Syria if anything happens to UNIFIL, Siniora, Jumblatt, or others. Given Bashar al-Asad's fury at UNSCR 1701 and the special tribunal, only fear will make him hesitate, Hariri said.

TRADING SINIORA'S HEAD
TO OUST LAHOUD?

¶12. (S) The Ambassador asked Hariri about the rumors circulating in Beirut of a potential deal to oust Siniora and Lahoud at the same time. Hariri said that he indeed would back such a plan, "for we can always bring Fouad back later; Lahoud will be finished." But there are no specific proposals in this regard. In any case, Hariri said, the March 14 forces will try now to reshift the focus back to Lahoud. It is outrageous that the debate now revolves around the March 8-Aoun demand to oust Siniora, when in fact Lahoud

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is almost universally despised. "You will see," Hariri vowed, an increasingly public campaign by the March 14 forces to concentrate the debate on Lahoud. Hariri said that, just before the campaign begins, he would visit the Patriarch, a meeting that would suggest to the public that the Patriarch was informed and blessed the idea of a negative PR press against Lahoud.

¶13. (S) The Ambassador asked whether, if some deal could be found to get rid of Lahoud, Hariri had any hope of getting March 14 united behind one presidential candidate. Hariri, who had spoken with passion thorough the meeeting, turned reticent, talking about others' views rather than his own. The Patriarch, he said, has shifted and now wants a "compromise" president, someone who can talk to both March 8

and March 14. Pressed by the Ambassador for his own views, Hariri talked about a meeting he had with Hassan Nasrallah months ago, "when we were still talking." At that meeting, he said, several names came up as potential replacements for Lahoud: LAF Commander Michel Sleiman, Central Bank Governor Riadh Salameh, and former MP from Jbeil Nazem Khoury. Charles Rizk would have been "excellent," but he has now burned too many bridges to March 8. Michel Edde is "too old."

A MEETING SOON WITH BERRI?

¶14. (S) The Ambassador asked whether Hariri had tried to talk to Berri about getting rid of Lahoud, since Berri's distaste for Lahoud is as well known as the constraints on Berri's freedom of action. "I'm not talking to Nabih," Hariri admitted. The Ambassador responded that, in his view, Hariri had no choice but to renew contact with Berri. Hariri said that he intended to visit Berri in the next day or two. In the meantime, he had passed Berri a message via Ghazi Aridi, accusing Berri of "killing Rafiq Hariri again." Siniora offered a more reconciliatory approach to Berri: "We have to show Nabih the way to help us and help himself," despite the Syrian and Iranian heavy influence over him. But, nevertheless, Siniora, too, had no immediate plans to see Berri.

ENCOURAGING A FORWARD-LOOKING VISION AND TALKING OF HIZBALLAH'S DISARMAMENT

¶15. (S) The Ambassador asked Hariri about March 14 plans once the current crisis ends. No matter how it ends, the Ambassador said, March 14 leaders must return to the campaign mode they had in spring 2005. They must project a positive vision for Lebanon's future, not simply talk about Rafiq Hariri's martyrdom. Hariri insisted that March 14 would be projecting a more unified, consistent message, initially about Lahoud's ouster, and he listened with more patience than usual as the Ambassador urged some kind of March 14 "war room" with professional media advisors and others. As for his own hopes for the post-crisis period, Hariri said that he wanted to focus the country once and for all on Hizballah's weapons. It is clearer than ever, Hariri said, what a distortion Hizballah's weapons cause, and Hizballah must see the March 14 leaders are united in insisting on Hizballah's disarmament. It may take time and involve political compromises, but Hizballah must disarm.

¶16. (S) The Ambassador commented that Hariri was more explicit on this point than he ever had been in the past; was he merely trying to seduce the USG by singing an appealing tune? After all, there were lots of anecdotes shared from the National Dialogue and subsequent consultations that suggested Hariri was telling Nasrallah that he shouldn't worry about his arms. Saying that he was going to tell the Ambassador something he had not shared with any foreigners, Hariri said that his father Rafiq had once told him of a conversation he had in one of his secret sessions with Nasrallah. The meeting occurred in 2005, before UNSCR 1559 was adopted and Emile Lahoud's presidential mandate extended. In that meeting, Rafiq urged Nasrallah to drop the alliance with Syria in favor of a closer alliance with him. Given Hizballah's popularity, Hizballah didn't need Syria and didn't need Emile Lahoud's extension. When he thinks about his father's description of this meeting, Saad said that he realizes that his father was offering to replace Syria as Hizballah's partner. And this admission by his father at hoping to reduce Syria's influence, Saad said, is probably what got Rafiq killed. So, yes, he wants

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Hizballah's disarmament. Whether directly involved or not, Nasrallah probably gave Bashar al-Asad the information that provoked the order to assassinate Rafiq.

